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LANDSCAPE AND LIGHT

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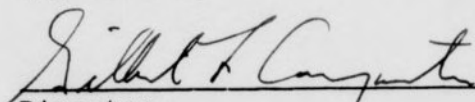
Elizabeth S. Ross

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Director

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ROSS, ELIZABETH SPROUL. Landscape and Light (1965)
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This thesis, "Landscape and Light," is an introduction to twelve landscape paintings. Each painting is named for a month of the year, nine months being represented. There is a brief survey of paintings by the Limbourg brothers and Pieter Brueghel, which also have seasonal reference. The painter compares these paintings to her own and expresses her preoccupation with the effects of light upon landscape.

The body of the written thesis is an examination of each of these paintings as to its source of inspiration and the technical problems encountered. Many of these explanations are preceeded by a Japanese Haiku poem.

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INTRODUCTION

LANDSCAPE AND LIGHT

The months of the year provide titles for my exhibition of paintings. The theme developed by reflection rather than by intention. At the time of the painting, I was involved with the effects of light as it hit upon surfaces in the out-of-doors and with the technical problems of translating this into paint. These atmospheric conditions of each month are recalled in my paintings: the soft light of September as it filters through the grapevine, the haze of October which renders the colors of leaves even more brilliant to our eyes, the sun upon snow in December which makes sky and land alike in intensity. Only one painting, "November," was not painted in the month for which it was named. This painting, derived from a brief visit to my home hills in November in the late afternoon when the sky seemed to invade the valley, was a moment very strongly implanted in my memory. The painting was executed in February, a month not so different in character as to be distracting to me as I painted it.

The use of the seasons as a theme of painting is very nearly as old as landscape painting itself. In the early Fifteenth Century, the Limbourg brothers identified each month of the year according to seasonal changes of occupation and of landscape in their Book of Hours, a liturgical book for laymen which became the major model for calendar illustration until the early Sixteenth Century. In this book the landscape is seen as more than merely a backdrop for human figures even though the figures yet exist within the enchanting fairy tale vision of the Gothic age, and as such, are larger than life.

The calendar illuminations provided inspiration for a series of paintings of the seasons and their occupations done by the Sixteenth Century Flemish painter, Pieter Brueghel. Here, however, man has become part of nature. He is seen driving the herds, hunting, harvesting, but he is no longer master of his own fate; his fate lies within the tremendous force of nature. In the "Return of the Herds" both man and beast bow before an impending storm. In "The Harvesters" some of the men work in the fields while others rest from the heat and exertion of the day. The human form has taken its place within the structure of the painting, but does not dominate the drama of the painting. Storm and darkness, sun and

heat set the mood; the receding horizontal planes of the land and the tall trees of the foreground determine the structure.

Although man plays a secondary part in Breughel's paintings of the seasons, he is yet necessary to set the scale of the painting and to reflect the force of the natural world. In my paintings there is an intentional lack of human form. Nature, alone, is the subject. In many instances there is no intermediary to establish a sense of size or to register the effect of nature. One might be viewing a patch of weeds or the pattern of distant hills and mountains.

It seems that I, as a painter, have always been most affected by life movement which exists in the sky, the fields, the woods--nature that has not been sheathed by the hand of man, but by the sun. The moods of early and late sun never cease to delight my eye and my spirit. The morning sun wanders through the woods and into my kitchen, as welcome as a friend bringing news of a good day ahead. The afternoon sun throws out a warm glow which dissolves the harsh realities of the working day gone by. And not to be forgotten is the cloud-covered sun, so usual here in winter, whose light covers the land with silver and makes one forget the cold. My wish is that my painting should reflect the vitality of the natural

world. The moral and sociological problems find no place in these paintings for it is enough to search for form, for color, for rhythm, and for a penetrating light that can be meaningful to me in terms of nature.

AUGUST

"The Path to the Glass Mountain"

This path is surrounded by the tall grasses, by small flowered weeds. Light filters through the foliage and onto the ground. Shapes are both made and dissolved by light. It is a world unto itself where man can enter into solitude and rejoice in both the warmth of the sun and the coolness of the shade.

This painting was a long time in the making. It was started in June, but was not fully resolved until the following August and early September. The great contrast in color was challenging and rewarding. The search for unity of sky and land required a considerable amount of experimentation. The near-white color was, I felt, necessary to the purpose of the invasion of sky into land, but at first became chalky forms rather than translucent light. This was finally controlled by glazes of blue and orange over the most opaque areas of white.

Perhaps at another time I will be able to achieve these desired effects without so much struggle, but at the moment, this painting is a favorite. The struggle endears it to me, however impertinent that may be to the actual quality of the painting. Nevertheless, that which I sought was found.

SEPTEMBER

"Briefly the sun shines
Brightly between cloud and sea
Fading as rain falls"¹

Onteï

The poem-title of this painting is "Japanese Haiku." At first discovery of these gems of poetry I was entranced, for here in a seventeen-syllable poem was a complement to my painting. Neither these poems nor my paintings are monumental. Their effectiveness lies in their quiet and intimate glimpse of life. The Haiku is a lightly-sketched picture which usually holds a seasonal reference and which the reader is expected to complete from his own associations and nostalgias. It is in this very personal way that I should like those who observe my paintings to be drawn into them. These poems I will use as an introduction to many of my paintings at the risk of seeming more literary than I intend, for in no instance was

¹Haiku Harvest, trans. Peter Beilenson and Henry Behn, (Mount Vernon, N.Y.: The Peter Pauper Press, 1962), p. 48.

there an attempt to illustrate the selected poem.

This painting was made at the time of fall showers when sea and sky are suddenly brought together by the deluge. At first the contrast of colors and the touch of sea and sky was too contrived. These problems were solved by covering the entire canvas with yellow ochre and then rubbing the color off with a soft cloth. After the glaze was dry, there was one more painting session in which the forms of sea and land were made a little more definite and the diagonal strokes of the rain were brought down from the sky.

SEPTEMBER

"The Grapevine"

A soft light touches the leaves of the September grapevine. The top leaves have begun to turn the warm colors of autumn, but the underside of the vine is still silver and green and a few grapes hang there, having gone unnoticed. The light comes through the leaves, striking the top surface of some, making others stand out in silhouette, and shining through the outlines of those which have been etched by the beetles.

As in "August," the technical difficulty was again having the white paint become light. This lightest color had to come from behind the darker forms, but at first seemed to come

forward instead. A blue-gray glaze helped to push the light color back into the painting. The leaves were brought forward by simplifying the forms and by touching them with a few highlights.

Generally, my paintings begin with an impression of some definite subject, time, and place--like this grapevine outside a window of my home. Occasionally, I will make a sketch before starting a painting, but most often my preparation for a canvas is to study my subject at the same time of day for several days until a synthesis has formed in my mind. At other times an impression of a particular moment, as evidenced in "November" and "December," is mulled over until it, too, has taken shape in my mind. With the first brush stroke on the canvas, the painting, as it becomes a reality--an object complete in itself--shares the control with the recalled image. Then the problem is to keep a balance between this image and the technique employed to bring it into being.

Technique in itself does not interest me. That a painter must learn to control his medium is self-evident. Color value, luminosity of paint, and strength of pigments are exceedingly important to the craft of painting, but, this craft must be learned well enough that it can be recalled without overpowering the theme of the painting--without becoming the theme.

OCTOBER

"I didn't enter...
But I stopped in reverence...
Autumn-leaf temple"²

Buson

With hesitancy, I admit that this painting is cut from a larger painting. In the large painting I was pleased with the brilliance of the color, with the receding space, and with the motion of the wind-swept leaves. This was Autumn!--the maple trees on Market Street. But the painting denied personal involvement, for the space relationships were too exactly defined and not enough was left to the observer's imagination. A too-perfect balance existed between the trees of the background and golden grove of trees of the foreground. It fell in line with the tradition of the Barbizon painters. Mr. Carpenter dared me to cut it. A month went by before I had summoned enough courage to commit such a traitorous act. But when it was done, it was right!

²Basho, Buson, and Others. Cherry Blossoms, (Mount Vernon, N.Y.: The Peter Pauper Press, 1960), p. 46.

OCTOBER

"So enviable...
Maple-leaves most glorious
Contemplating death"³

Shiko

The sky is bright, full of movement. The leaves have not all been touched by the color-changing cold of night. Tomorrow all the leaves may be red and brown, and then the wind will take away this brilliance. So today we rejoice.

This painting has had two complete stages. The first was painted during those early fall days and existed in a finished state for several months. Most of it had been painted in the studio on a day when repairmen were working on the lights, and my corner had barely enough illumination to distinguish light from dark. The colors had been set out before the lights had gone off and I could remember where they had been placed. It really was great fun, and the painting had great depth and luminosity--especially when the lights were low. That was the catch--when the painting was well lit, the reds and greens fought each other. After several months of looking at the painting, I decided I would never be

³Japanese Haiku (Mount Vernon, N.Y.: The Peter Pauper Press, 1955), p. 47.

completely happy with it. The deep, pure colors were changed into middle tones and more variations of color were employed; still it has movement and gaiety.

NOVEMBER

"The View Across Barn Hill"

Barn Hill is the highest point of our Virginia farm. From it can be seen rows of rolling hills which disappear into mountains in the east and west. The late afternoon of a day early in November most directly inspired this painting. The sun had already dropped behind the mountains, leaving the sky so bright that the sky itself seemed to drop into the hills. This painting took shape quickly and easily. There was more than a little kinesthetic pleasure in the experience of painting it.

Perhaps my fascination with light stems from two sources: growing up in the country where one's daily activity is determined by the weather, and by a number of years of keen interest in photography. A photographer must be constantly aware of the direction of and intensity of light, and of the way objects absorb or reflect light. After a number of years of training one's eyes to see this, it becomes automatic to notice these variables.

DECEMBER"Locust Grove"

This is the home place, with its hills, tree groves, and the distant but encompassing mountains. I was pleased to come far enough in my painting that there could be a view objective enough to be translated into painting. Of course, I had painted the site many times before from childhood on, but this was the first time I felt that the qualities of the painting could exist apart from the reference. The painting is dear to me partly because of its association to my life, but the depiction of the place has finally become more than a subjective interpretation.

The moment of the painting was seen on a morning shortly after Christmas of last year. Except for the roadways and a few cattle paths, the Christmas snow was undisturbed. The day was crystal clear, the sky deep blue, and the shadows of a rich purple. The moment stuck fast in my memory.

JANUARY

"Blinding wild snow
 Blows, whirls and drifts about me...
 In this world alone"⁴

Chora

The snow had only been forecast at the time this painting was begun, but the sky was heavy, and before I left the studio, snow had begun to fall. The actual painting time on this was very short. The basic structure took shape within a few moments. However, after those initial strokes of paint, I knew that here was a quality I must handle gently to retain. Many hours of thinking in front of the painting were required before I had decided upon the exact color and the exact shape that were needed to complete the painting. In the first session, a soft green color appeared from under the white--the ground not yet covered by snow--but after consideration, was eliminated. A light blue-gray replaced the green.

⁴Basho, Buson, and Others. The Four Seasons, (Mount Vernon, N.Y.: The Peter Pauper Press, 1958), p. 59.

JANUARY

"In my New Year heart
I feel no fury...
Even at these trampers of snow"⁵
Yayu

The poem seems a sufficient introduction to this painting. As this canvas is small, 20" by 24", I wished to limit myself to only a few significant brush strokes. This was accomplished to my satisfaction, and I was also happy with the duality of composition--the three dark areas (rocks) making a triangular pattern seen against the vertical pattern of trees and path.

⁵Basho, Buson, and Others. The Four Seasons (Mount Vernon, N.Y.: The Peter Pauper Press, 1958), p.60.

FEBRUARY"Warm Light in February"

From my kitchen table I look out upon a woods, a treasured place I intuitively turn to when there is need to review my thoughts and renew my energies. This painting is a product of my observation of the late afternoon sun as it strikes the tree limbs, and warms those obstinate dead leaves who have yet to be taken by wind and snow.

The structure of the painting, one I have returned to year after year without much success, is the repetitive vertical brush strokes which take their place in a horizontal pattern. "The Grapevine" has a similar structure. These two have many predecessors which have met extinction, but these seem to survive for me. I should like to think that this repetition of stroke lends the painting a quality of music or dance. I did discover that a lyrical quality could not be found in this painting until I had toned down the high contrasts. I had been intent on including the tall dark pines of the woods, but their deep greens, as seen against the golds, were too distracting in this medium sized canvas. When the dark tones were excluded, the warm tones began to have life.

It does not seem that my painting is ever completely abstract, even when there are no recognizable forms. For me,

realism and abstraction become one within a good painting. Although there is no object readily identifiable in the February painting (unless it might be that the dark line extending from the center of the painting to the bottom seems obviously a tree shape), the forms and the colors seem just as descriptive of mood and subject as "November" with its more clearly defined shapes. Often I am happiest with those paintings which nurture the imagination by their suggestion rather than by their definition of form.

MARCH

"The March Wind Doth Blow"

And out of the red, clay mud of the Piedmont comes the first sign of the rebirth of spring. The green is new, tender, not yet established on the dead earth cover. A warm, gentle wind dips down to touch the fields, enticing the new plant life.

This painting was always exciting, but was inclined to go out of control. It followed directly upon the February painting and shows evidence of being both more assured and more daring, although it loses subtlety in the process. The painting had several stages that delighted me. The green was so alive, so like that first growth showing through the mellow tones of the winter grasses. The red mud color did not appear until the

final stage. It needed the undertones of greens and yellows to become unified with the grays and greens of the fields.

APRIL

"Spring morning marvel...
Lovely nameless little hill
On a sea of mist"⁶

Basho

The mist dissolves, exposing the new green hills, the untilled red fields, and a forest yet unclothed by spring's finery. This painting developed quickly and with ease. I could have gone on, but I felt that doing so would destroy that tender quality consistent to the theme. Also, I suppose I was afraid of the small canvas, since I know that I am inclined, especially in small areas, to become too involved in unnecessary detail.

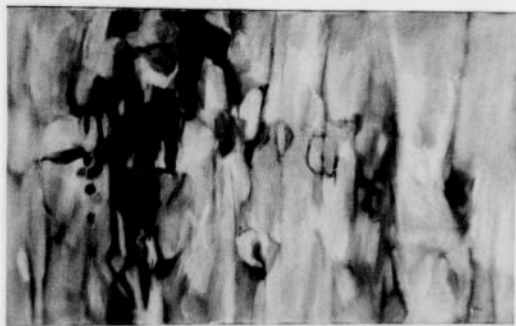
⁶Basho, Buson and Others. The Four Seasons, (Mount Vernon, N.Y.: The Peter Pauper Press, 1958), p. 60.

CONCLUSION

The conception of space, the search for an atmospheric mood, a delight with the growing and changing organic forms of nature--these are the concerns of my painting, and those of a noble tradition of landscape painters and Romantic poets. Although not always in tune with contemporary art in this fast-paced, mass-oriented day, these matters are the part of my sense of reality which I am compelled to deal with if I am to be expressive through the visual means of painting. These thesis paintings are merely a beginning of my search for expression of a vision of nature which seems significant to my eye and mind.



August



September



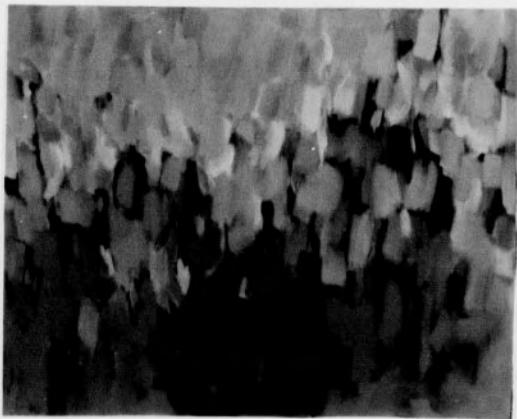
October



November



December



February

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